

Exploring the Environment and Migration Nexus in the Brahmaputra Valley

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Abstract

For the longest time, the Brahmaputra has been the source of inspiration for many poets and story tellers from Assam. Like the inhabitants along its banks, the Brahmaputra embraces a heterogeneous identity. This paper is a retelling of the narrative of the banks of the river, incorporating its dynamic elements and weaving together stories of the people displaced due to environmental factors. Anil Roychoudhury, in his book, *The Social Structure of Lower Assam* describes how the narrative of the socio-economic fabric of many districts lying in the lower course of Brahmaputra experienced a structural change after the alteration of the course of the river and its tributaries.

The 1970s saw researchers venture into a new kind of academic discourse that made linkages between environmental degradation and migration. Despite these attempts, the international community has failed to come to a consensual understanding of terms like “environment migrants” and “climate refugees”. The United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR) has no mandate for so-called “climate displacement” as it falls beyond the scope of its Statute and the Refugee Convention. (McAdam, 2010) This lack of universal recognition of the problem is a cause of concern, especially in the eastern parts of India. The districts of Assam located in the lower course of the Brahmaputra like Dhubri, Goalpara and Barpeta feature in the world map as “hotspots” for climate change. The people living in these areas are particularly vulnerable to effects of climate change which manifest in the form of frequent floods, steady erosion of the banks due to change in the volume of water and lack of availability of fresh water. This paper will focus solely on the nature of forced internal migration as a result of displacement due to the above reasons. Migration in these circumstances is unavoidable and permanent. Assam has a long and varied history of external migration right from the colonial times. People from present day Bangladesh streamed into Assam to cater to the labour requirements of the East

India Company as they set up sprawling tea gardens. The partition of India and East Pakistan in 1947 saw another phase of migration and the third phase was seen during the 1971 genocide that took place before the liberation of Bangladesh. The reason I mention the above is because, the effects of external migration have been tumultuous in Assam. History has shown that integration of these new communities into the social and economic structures of Assam have been far from harmonious. With the onset of an increasing pace and scale of internal migration, especially from the low lands in the banks of Brahmaputra to urban areas like Guwahati and Nagaon, one needs to assess the efforts of the state and the civil society to ensure a non-antagonistic integration of the migrants into the social, political and economic structures of the towns and cities.

This study is an inter-disciplinary approach to comprehend climate-change induced 'internal migration' using qualitative research. Lack of universally recognized definitions that differentiate 'environment migrant' from others constrains the study to secondary sources like journals, relevant books and government reports.

To conclude, this paper tries to establish the fact that environment degradation and effects of climate change on the river Brahmaputra are a significant cause of internal migration from areas close to the river in lower Assam to the urban centers. There is a pressing need to establish universalized definitions in order to recognize environment migrants in the global sphere. The state policies should not just focus on rehabilitating environment migrants and mitigating effects of climate change, appropriate measures should be taken towards creating sustainable infrastructure within the hotspots so that migration does not remain as the only feasible alternative for displaced people.

Key words- environment migrants, internal migration, displacement, rehabilitation

Introduction

Rivers have stories to tell; authors like Mark Twain, Hermann Hesse and Amitav Ghosh brought beautiful narratives about people with the backdrop of rivers. Similarly, the river Brahmaputra has been a source of inspiration for many poets and story-tellers from Assam. The Brahmaputra originates in the Angsi glacier in Tibet and undertakes a long journey as it transverses into India, flows into Bangladesh to finally pour into the Bay of Bengal. A river with such enormous length and breadth, flowing through a diverse geographical terrain, surely has its own narratives. Like the inhabitants along its banks, the Brahmaputra embraces a heterogeneous identity. This

heterogeneity has been the cause for celebration as well as conflict. This paper reflects some of the key anxieties that arise when climate change induced environmental disasters are recognized as catalysts for internal displacement and migration along the Brahmaputra valley. It reviews the available literature with respect to correlations between environment, displacement, migration and conflict. Contemporary debates about environment-induced displacement, historical perspectives of migration in Assam along with, adaptation, mitigation and accommodation policies of the state are some of the components of this study.

Definitions, Categorizations and Guidelines

Today, the imminence of climate change is a fact well-established. Starting from the historic Brundtland Commission Report where climate change was considered a ‘plausible and serious probability’ to the formation of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, public perceptions and policy actions have come a long way. There is enough scientific evidence to support concerns pertaining to climate change and its immediate effect on humans. Yet, there is still significant lacuna in addressing climate change from many international communities. Perhaps the biggest obstacle in the way of policy making for the people displaced due to environmental issues triggered by climate change is the lack of definitions. In this context, definition is crucial to accomplish the task of identifying the target groups. “Debates around linkages between environmental degradation and forced migration have led to the emergence of a range of highly contested terms – primarily environmental refugee, but also environmental migrant, forced environmental migrant, environmentally motivated migrant, climate refugee, climate change refugee, environmentally displaced person (EDP), disaster refugee, environmental displacee, eco-refugee, ecological displaced person and environmental refugee-to-be (ERTB).” (Boano, Zetter, & Morris, 2008) Despite available scientific estimations of climate change induced displacement, discrepancies emerge because it is very difficult to isolate the causes for migration. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees lay down thirty guidelines for the IDPs in the year 1998. They are divided into the following segments- general principles, principles relating to protection from displacement, principles relating to protection during displacement, principles relating to humanitarian assistance and, principles relating to return, resettlement and reintegration. (UNHCR, 1998) Though, there has been a growing consensus with respect to categorization of environment migrants as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), the idea of environment refugees still lacks institutional support.

Environmental Vulnerabilities in the Brahmaputra Valley

The environment and migration nexus is one of the most under-researched and under-recognized aspects in understanding climate change. “Disasters triggered by natural hazards caused twice as many new displacements in 2015 as conflict and violence. Over the past eight years, there have been 203.4 million displacements by disasters”.(IDMC, 2016)The global south will undoubtedly have to bear disproportionate costs of the effects of climate change due to inadequate coping mechanisms. The North East region of India and its neighbouring countries like Nepal and Bangladesh are particularly vulnerable to even slight deviations in weather patterns; flash floods and landslides occur frequently in these areas. The Global Internal Displacement Report suggested that in absolute figures, India topped the list with the maximum number of internal displacement cases due to disasters.(IDMC, 2016) Research about climate change implications in India is mostly limited to studies done in the Sunderbans delta region. Similar studies to explore causes and effects of natural disasters due to climate change have not been undertaken on a significant scale in other highly vulnerable areas like the Brahmaputra valley in Assam. “Studies have shown that Assam falls within areas of greatest climate sensitivity, maximum vulnerability and lowest adaptive capacity.”(Assam, 2015)Being an alluvial river, the Brahmaputra has an old history of flooding. But the magnitude of floods and its devastating effects on the lives of people has seen substantial increase in the past decade. Though there are several natural causes for the floods, closer inspection reveals that human interventions also have a role to play.

(Bhattachaiyya & Bora, 1997)

Massive dams constructed on the Brahmaputra and its tributaries contribute to the unpredictable nature of the floods in the valley. The intensity of flood, riverbank erosion and landslide has increased substantially over the years in terms of area and victims.(Hussain & Phanjoubam, 2007)Floods in the Brahmaputra valley have far-reaching consequences on the lives and the livelihoods of people living there; the worst affected are the river islands, followed by the villages in districts that lie close to the river. Most of the population along the river banks is engaged in agriculture. Deforestation has led to increased erosion of the top soil, which further leads to aggravated sedimentation, which in turn decreases the water retention capacity of the river. Large tracts of land are swept away by the river every year. The instability caused by flash

floods and frequent erosion of soil renders most people homeless and landless. Dispossession of land pushes people into the fringes, as they try to cultivate newer lands by clearing forests. Thus, what begins as a consequence of deforestation, leads to further deforestation. In a case study done by Debojyoti Das in the island of Majuli, it was found that besides loss of cultivable land to the river, silt deposits post flooding in the farmlands posed an equal challenge for agriculture. (Das, 2015) Each episode of flooding adds to the vulnerabilities of the people living in the affected regions as more and more people fall under the category of IDPs. A total crop area of 99,416.44 hectares was destroyed in the floods that took place in the valley during the monsoons of 2016. (Assam Tribune, 2016) Apart from crops, there is enormous infrastructural damage. Houses, schools, embankments, roads, bridges and power transmitters are destroyed each year. Vulnerability of people to water-borne and vector-borne diseases increase significantly. Living under these circumstances while bearing the costs of natural disasters year after year, often compel people to look at migration as a feasible alternative.

Historical Context of Migration in Assam

Migration has played a central role in shaping Assam's socio-economic fabric over the ages. During colonial times, Assam saw a large wave of migration as people from Central India were taken to work in the tea plantations of the British. There was scarcity of labour in Assam as most of the indigenous people lived subsistence lives. The second wave of migrants came from East Pakistan, post-independence. (Dutta, 2015) Irregular migrations to Assam happened simultaneously from parts of Nepal along with traders from different parts of India who saw the growth of a potential market in Assam. (Devi, 2007) These varied experiences of influx of migrants from several parts of South Asia gave rise to insecurities among the native communities of Assam. Fault lines emerged as soon as economic deprivations were correlated to the growing numbers of the migrant communities and it manifested in the form of the Assam Andolan, where a large section of urban youth initiated a political campaign against the "foreigners". Thus, assessing the current migration trends without considering the historical context might give fairly misleading results. Though the linkages between environment and migration are not yet fully established, it is an undeniable fact that there are strong undercurrents of the phenomenon of forced migration in Assam. Districts like Goalpara, Dhubri and Bongaigaon have a sizeable population of people who do not fall into the conventional Assamese speaking category. Their

dialect is largely influenced by Bengali, owing to their geographical proximity to Bangladesh and West Bengal. Also, these are some of the districts worst affected by floods during monsoons. Thus, when migrants from these districts find themselves in cities, there is often an identity crisis that accompanies them. Often, in cities like Guwahati and Nagaon, the general skepticism about Bengali Muslims being illegal immigrants from Bangladesh is further extended to include almost any Bengali-speaking migrant or Muslim migrant. Thus, confusion regarding linguistic and religious identities translates into discrimination and other cases of ethnic conflicts in the urban centers.

Socio-economic Conditions of IDPs in the Brahmaputra Valley

North East India has always been an epicenter of conflict, be it international conflict, violent secessionist movements or ethnic clashes. The process of identifying IDPs in this region is often colored by the state's attempts to manipulate the numbers in order to hide the failures of their policies, or the lack of policies itself. (Hussain M.)“In the past the state would provide land to the people displaced by erosion. But in the recent decades, the state finds it difficult to continue with this due to ever increasing pressure of population on land.” (Islam, 2008) State support to IDPs has usually been seen in the form of relief camps. A survey followed by a report documented by the Asian Commission for Human Rights revealed that IDPs seeking shelter in the camps lived in sub-human conditions without adequate provisions for food, clothing and sanitation. The Criminal Investigation Department of Assam Police also revealed that the people living in the relief camps are the most vulnerable to the flourishing flesh trade in Assam. In the case of environment-induced displacement like floods, the possibilities of rehabilitation are usually bleak. Large areas of the Brahmaputra valley are still highly dependent on the agrarian economy. The livelihoods of the people are closely linked to their land and the river. When the river erodes their land, they are immediately dispossessed of their source of livelihood. In these circumstances, the scope for rehabilitation in the same area is very limited. Naturally, the IDPs are forced to migrate in search of employment. Intricate links between environment-induced displacement and consequent migration in search of economic activities contribute to the discrepancies in the environment migrants' debate. The vulnerabilities of forced migrants are manifold. “These vulnerabilities do not exist discretely but overlap in complex ways.” (De Souza, et al., 2015) There is a legal protection gap due to the ongoing debates on identifying

environment migrants, there are higher possibilities of the migrants facing social discrimination and there is acute uncertainty about the economic prospects in a new location.

In the case of Brahmaputra valley, displacement and migration are consequences of not just natural disasters. The changing patterns of flooding and erosion indicate strong evidence that climate change is partly responsible. The dynamic nature of climate change brings along with it enormous uncertainties. It is the state's responsibility to not just conduct relief operations post disasters, but also to enhance adaptive capacities for the vulnerable communities. Overarching effects of climate change can already be seen in Bangladesh. Increased media attention and growing research has compelled the state and the international agencies to push for mitigation policies in the country. Assam shares a land boundary with Bangladesh; the geographic features of both the areas have many commonalities. Despite that, in comparison to Bangladesh, India's approach to understanding and formulating mitigation policies for climate change in the Brahmaputra valley has been lackadaisical, with a missing sense of urgency.

State Intervention for Mitigating Effects of Climate Change on the Environment

The role of the state becomes extremely important to manage the complexities that arise out of migration. Mitigation policies for forced migration need to focus on four key aspects- reduction of vulnerability, promotion of adaptation, resilience and sustainability. (Boano, Zetter, & Morris, 2008) Many a times in the case of environment induced displacement, migration becomes a necessity rather than a choice. Capacity building measures should be initiated to ensure that the people from vulnerable communities can expand their livelihood options and diversify their income sources to reduce their dependencies on land. Adaptation interventions should include participatory methods to strengthen local institutions and increase their preparedness to cope with disasters. Risk mapping is one such participatory method where the community self-identifies and assesses the risks associated to their societies. (Aalst, Cannon, & Burton, 2008) Anderson and Woodrow suggested in the 1990s that disaster relief should not treat the affected people as helpless victims, but as agents for their own recovery. But it is only to a certain extent that the affected can create resilient local structures like community risk management. State intervention is essential to create sustainable mitigation structures. Under the corpus of the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC), the State Action Plan on

Climate Change was set up by the Government of Assam in 2015. The SAPCC has done various scoping studies and identified how climate change can affect a range of profiles like forests, habitats, agriculture, energy and urban settlements. However, the responsibility for adaptation rests upon several disintegrated departments. There is a need to bring in synergy between the actions of these departments for the successful implementation of the action plan. The SAPCC report acknowledges the physical and social vulnerabilities, and the foreseeable impacts of climate change. Yet, there is no mention of any dedicated policy for the environment-induced IDPs.

Links between Migration, Environment and Conflict

“People can adapt to environmental problems in three ways: stay in place and do nothing, accepting the costs; stay in place and mitigate changes; or leave affected areas”. (Reuveny, 2007) One of the most direct implications of environment-induced displacement is migration. “Lessening the need for distress migration is tied to decreasing pre-disaster vulnerability through building assets, ensuring proper health infrastructure is constructed, negotiating local terms of land tenure and use during dire situations (i.e. food shortages), and insuring crops.” (Raleigh, Jordan, & Salehyan) Assam has seen a massive, unplanned phenomenon of urbanization in the last few decades. There are popular perceptions of labour demand in the urban centers within states. Cities and towns like Guwahati, Jorhat and Nagaon have been drawing large proportions of migrants in search of economic opportunities. Movement from rural to urban areas intensifies with the onslaught of environmental disasters, since they usually affect rural areas due to insufficient coping infrastructure. “A region that has a history of tension or conflict (particularly one that is related to migration) might be susceptible to increased instability due to migration influx.” (Burrows & Kinney, 2016) Assam’s local history of conflict, diverse composition of ethnicities coupled with a slow economy, is particularly susceptible to migrant-host conflicts. (Homer-Dixon, 1994) There are several factors that instigate conflict between the migrants and the hosts in the receiving areas. Competition for limited resources is one of the key causes that drive hostility towards migrants. Cities like Guwahati and Jorhat are experiencing a huge influx of migrants. But infrastructure has not been able to keep up with the requirements of the growing population. Even though the cities are expanding as more and more people settle on the fringes, there is acute shortage of water and energy. Apart from competition

for scarce resources, insecurities about group identities are also catalysts for the growing antagonism. The Assamese population is largely disintegrated due to cultural barriers on the basis of dialects, occupation and religion. There has never been any consolidated representation of the native population. Hence, an influx of migrants naturally raises concerns among the resident population regarding their ethnic identities. Assam's gross domestic product (GDP) is one of the lowest among the states in India. (MOSPI, 2015) Low prospects of employment, a stagnant market, insufficient institutions for higher education and scarcity of resources like water in the cities have created an atmosphere of general discontent in the urban areas.

Migrants in Urban Spaces

Rural to urban migration has longstanding implications on the migrating communities, the host community and the receiving areas. Urban spaces especially, can be very hostile to IDPs and forced migrants. Lack of affluent social networks and money drives the migrants to live in slums and other informal settlements. Alienation experienced by IDPs and forced migrants in urban spaces are multi-dimensional. Apart from the rural and urban gap, there exist differences even between the occupations of the urban poor and the migrants because of a mismatch in the skill sets. There is a sharp decline on the standards of living due to heightened non-food expenditures. Slums and other informal settlements are also the breeding grounds for various diseases like malaria and typhoid. Migrants, especially women and children are also vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse in the urban slums. Political participation is also limited due to their status of being migrants. Thus, in a situation where the "substantive freedoms" of the migrants are excessively compromised, migrant communities usually develop their own coping mechanisms to reduce their vulnerabilities. Coping strategies usually include diversification of income, social networking with neighbours and expenditure minimizing strategies. (Chetia, 2014) Some of the recommendations made by the Brookings Report on IDPs in urban spaces are as follows- supporting family and neighbor networks, raising awareness about IDPs among host communities, promoting and protecting the political participation of IDPs, making the governments and municipalities jointly responsible for assisting the IDPs and reviewing policies for assistance with long term perspectives. (Lopez, Arredondo, & Salcedo, 2011)

Conclusion

Climate change is a slow, ongoing process. It might take years to establish distinct correlations between climate change and its impact on environmental disasters. But to dismiss it altogether as a potential factor is highly fallacious. The Brahmaputra Valley is home to several diverse cultures, tribes, terrains, flora and fauna whose existence is at threat now. The flood situation in Assam is getting intensified year after year. Erosion of the river banks is not just loss of land, it is the loss of human capabilities and creation of many physical vulnerabilities. Although there could be several factors behind the internal migration dynamics in Assam, there is a substantial population of displaced people who are resorting to migration. The lack of universally accepted definitions with respect to environment migrants is certainly a bottleneck in policy formulation specific to IDPs. Local, vulnerable communities and their knowledge bases should be engaged in mitigation measures for environmental degradation and its consequent displacement of people. Most importantly, in the case of Assam, the government needs to take concrete steps to safeguard the interests of the IDPs. Along with increased economic opportunities, awareness about the crises in the riverbanks of the Brahmaputra needs to be generated in order to make the urban spaces more accommodative and non-antagonistic towards migrants.

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